

## Dutch marathon faces cries of discrimination

18 april 2011 | USA Today & 330 other websites & newspapers

By: Raf Casert, Associated Press, Brussels

BRUSSELS — The Utrecht Marathon has a new payment plan: A winning local Dutch runner can take home 100 times what a foreign winner pockets.

Organizers call it a smart incentive plan to develop Dutch running in a race that has been dominated by Kenyans, winners for the last four years. Critics see it as an ugly display of discrimination and racism.

Some also view it as a metaphor for Dutch society, where rising nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment have eroded the country's long-held image as a bastion of tolerance.

"The organizers thought up rules to discourage foreign runners," Tim Looten of the Art. 1 Dutch anti-discrimination organization said Monday. "That in fact is discrimination."

Utrecht Marathon organizer Louran van Keulen says he was just trying to encourage local marathoners to excel in his race next Monday.

"There is talk of discrimination, racism, oh, yes," Van Keulen said. "It is too bad about all the politics."

But, with objections coming from both the Utrecht city council to Nairobi half a world away, the criticism is likely to only get louder ahead of race day.

Van Keulen says he just wanted to boost local sports so Dutch runners can stand up to Africans in a decade or so. By eliminating his budget for international runners and investing it in 23 of the best local runners, he aims to improve the incentives and facilities.

Now, if a Dutchman wins, he gets the —100 (\$142) that goes to the first runner across the line but also a bonus of up to —10,000 (\$14,200) "or more" depending on the contract incentives the organizer has with the runner.

"The prize money has gone drastically down because we wanted to put it in the stimulus program" for the local racers, Van Keulen said. Female runners are not covered by the new plan.

Gert-Jan van Wijk, a Dutch businessman working in Nairobi, has already promised to restore Dutch honor in Kenya after days of intense criticism. He said he would make up the difference between whatever a local racer wins and what any foreigner would take as a winner — or about —9,900 (\$14,000).

Van Wijk decried "the tendency of Dutch society to look ever more inward."

"It is Dutch society at its smallest," said Van Wijk, owner of The World We Work In company.

"As a trading nation, the Dutch always looked at the world at large and were ready to compete. Now they just eliminate competition."

Marathon organizers often spend part of their budgets on travel costs, hotel accommodation and appearance fees to lure top Kenyan runners in the hope of setting a prestigious fast time.

Van Keulen said his overall budget for all international athletes last year was only —50,000 to —75,000 (\$71,000 to \$107,000), while the prize money alone for the winner of Sunday's London Marathon was \$55,000.

"Do you want to send subsidies and sponsorship abroad because we want to buy a fast time?" Van Keulen said. "I cannot afford a fast time anyway."

He said the six biggest marathons in the Netherlands over the past five years had produced 28 Kenyan winners out of 30 possible champions and it was time for something else. For Kenyans, marathon running is often a way to earn a living. And they do it well, winning races around the globe.

"If you are a top-25 finisher in a marathon in Kenya, there is a big chance you can win marathons all over the world and there is nothing wrong with that," Van Wijk said. "The marathon is their biggest export product."

Looten saw irony in the situation.

"It is funny. Normally people are discriminated against because they are not good enough but now it is because they are too good," he said. "I don't think the organizer has ill intent, but it would become bad if all organizations started acting like this."

In Utrecht, the city council — long a backer of the event — has also been taken aback, and has sent the plan to an equal treatment committee. However, that panel is not expected to rule before the race, according to Utrecht alderwoman Rinda den Besten.

"It is a great event of which we are so proud but now we are very unhappy. It gets a totally different image," Den Besten said. "All the negative reactions, the jokes, the cartoons. It is really bad."

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